



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AN ACCOUNT OF A PARTY PERISHING IN A BLIZZARD IN NORTHERN ILLINOIS

BY W. H. THACKER, ARLINGTON, WASHINGTON

In the summer of 1841, my father built a frame house into which he moved his family and, being a mechanic, converted the old cabin that had been our home into a workshop, where, during the inclement weather, much of his time was spent in making or repairing farm implements either for himself or his neighbors; such as cradles for cutting grain, scythe snaths for cutting grass, the woodwork for plows; ox yokes and sleds—in fact, almost any implement in demand in those early days before farm machinery was invented. When it was cold, a fire was made in the huge stone fire place that took up a large portion of one side of the room and the cabin was kept comfortable.

One day in mid-winter of 1841-2, father was at work in this shop, and the writer, then a small boy, was with him. The ground was covered with snow, the air was keen and bracing and the sun shone with unusual splendor; when, about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, a team loaded with household effects and accompanied by two men, one woman and two small children—little girls—drew up to the door of the shop, which stood close to the roadside, to inquire in regard to their route. As soon as father saw the woman and children he invited them in to get warm; an invitation they readily accepted. Light, dry wood was thrown on the fire and in a moment the flames were roaring up the great chimney; blocks of wood were placed before the hearth, boards laid upon them and the travelers comfortably seated. One of the men went out to the wagon, returning with luncheon, a tea or coffee pot was brought forth, water procured at the well close by, live coals pulled out, tea or coffee brewed and the wayfarers were soon enjoying a good meal which all seemed to relish.

They said they had been on the road since early morning; that their destination was some forty-five or fifty miles to the northwest from where they then were, where they intended locating; that they expected to reach it by the evening of the next day and thought they would be able to stop overnight with some settler along the road. The nearest settler living on the route they were traveling was not less than twelve or fifteen miles distant; but this they did not know until father so informed them. They appeared to be very nice, refined people from some of the eastern States. After an hour's rest, they continued their journey.

About the middle of the afternoon, the weather suddenly changed, turning very much colder; the atmosphere taking on a peculiarly hazy appearance; the wind came in puffs with ominous lulls between, and then, almost before we were conscious of the change, the wind was howling from the northwest, bearing on its wings the terrible blizzard, such as sometimes in the winter seasons swept over those northern prairies during their early settlement; though I understand that during the past fifty years or so those storms have only appeared in that part of the country in mild form and the people of today are disposed to discredit the stories that have come down to them from the old frontier days of men and horses perishing in them.

Their approach, too, was sometimes most unexpected and sudden, and a beautiful, sunshiny day be turned into midnight darkness so quickly, that almost before he was conscious of the fact, the wayfarer found himself plunged, as it were, into a blinding tempest, the freezing wind loaded with fine snow, swirling and hissing, that stung the flesh like needles points.

If one who knew the danger was caught in the grip of one of those deadly storms, he at once sought shelter if there was any close at hand, if only an open shed or a bunch of thick standing bushes—anything to break the force of that death-chilling wind, and there he would fight with all his might and energy against the insidious drowsiness that was sure to come creeping on after one became thoroughly chilled, until the storm had spent its force; but if no shelter was at hand, then the only thing to do was to wrap up, if one had anything for the purpose, and lie down in the wagon or sleigh box, first unhitching the team, and lie there till the storm was passed; if one had nothing to wrap up in, then get out and take it afoot, it was his only salvation; while at home, his family, if he had one, would pile wood

on the fire, place tallow dips in the window and every little while open the cabin door, peer out into the tempestuous darkness and then gather silently around the hearth with anxious faces listening for the sound of approaching footsteps or a cry of distress; for well they knew that unless he had found shelter, after the storm had passed a searching party would lift from its winding sheet of snow the icy form of him they loved.

If, however, the unfortunate was a new-comer-stranger in this land of winter blizzards and summer paradise, and ignorant of the deadly nature of the warring elements into which he so suddenly and unexpectedly found himself enveloped, he was possessed with an almost uncontrollable desire to hasten forward with all speed and, shielding his burning cheeks and smarting eyes as best he could from the blinding storm, that appeared to blister his flesh wherever it touched, he struggled on; but after a time realizing that his strength was failing, his road obliterated and that he had lost all knowledge of his course, he wandered blindly; he no longer felt the chill that pierced his very bones, a drowsiness stole over him—the first touch of death, and after stumbling sleepily along a little way, he flung himself down in the snow, as careless of his surroundings as a drunken man, and sinks into unconsciousness and then death.

If mounted on horseback or with a team, the traveler possessed the same desire to speed forward. There was something so demoralizing—I might say, terrorizing—in one of those fierce blizzards that turned day into night, that none but those who had had experience with them appeared capable of retaining their mental equilibrium and of acting in the proper manner; and no wonder, for to find one's self, almost before he was aware of the change, plunged, as it were, into such swirling, hissing, drifting sheets of fine, ice-like snow, swept forward on a driving gale across an open prairie and with such force and fury that neither man or beast could face it, was a sufficient reason to cause almost anyone to lose his head. In a few minutes the road was obliterated and the wind seeming to come from every direction in its swirling motion, the traveler was utterly bewildered; if he attempted to guide the team, for some reason that has never been clearly explained, he was almost sure to travel in circles; if given the reins, instinct, or some other faculty higher than man's, would lead the horses to a human habitation, if there happened to be one in the vicinity; if not,

they drifted before the storm, taking refuge at the first protection, if only a bunch of thick standing brush or a deep gully.

It was the invariable custom among trappers and hunters, when caught in one of these cruel storms, to stop then and there unless very near their camp or shelter; if in the timber, build a fire at once and gather plenty of wood, and, if possible, make some kind of a wind break; then, by keeping up a roaring fire and constant vigilance against sleep, he was in little danger. If out on the open prairie when overtaken by a blizzard, they wrapped themselves in their blankets, lay down and allowed the snow to drift over them, and the quicker and deeper the better. There they would lie till the storm had passed and then crawl out of their snowy tomb untouched by the frost.

But to return to the unfortunate travelers who warmed and lunched at my father's shop.

As above stated, a terrible blizzard came on about the middle of the afternoon, turning daylight into midnight darkness, raging all night and most of the next day, which caused father a great deal of anxiety in regard to the travelers, and several times I heard him express his fears to my mother, that they must have been overtaken by the storm before they could reach shelter, and, knowing them to be strangers in the country and unacquainted with the danger, he feared for the worst. Later on his fears proved to have been well founded.

A day or so after the storm had passed, these people were found a few miles to the north and a little west from Elk Grove; all were frozen to death, including their horses.

The surroundings and conditions in which they were discovered presented as pathetic a picture, perhaps, as was ever beheld, illustrating the danger to strangers who were unacquainted with the peril of being overtaken by those terrible, death-dealing blizzards, especially on the open prairie with no shelter near.

Standing by itself on the bleak, snow-covered prairie, half a mile or more from the road, a lone wagon was seen standing, that appeared to be deserted; but, when approached, a man stood leaning against it, his icy hands grasping the edge of the box, as if in the act of climbing into it, his head bent forward, his white face and sightless eyes fixed upon a roll of bedding inside, which, upon investigation, was found to contain the inanimate form of a young woman who appeared to be in the bloom of life, her face possessing a refined and beautiful expres-

sion that the chilling breath of the blizzard could not change. She had the appearance of sleeping there in the open wagon, in the midst of that wind-swept and snow-covered waste, and it required a moment after the wraps were removed for the on-lookers to realize that her bosom was not heaving nor her pulse throbbing with life.

Nestling by the young mother's side, but tucked inside of a feather bed among the feathers, were two little children—girls—about two and four years old, cuddled in each other's arms and to all appearances sleeping sweetly and soundly; and so they were believed to be; for it seemed hardly possible that the cold hand of the winter storm could reach them there, snuggled away in their nest of feathers; but when touched, it was found that as far as possessing life, they might have been babies carved out of solid ice by the hand of some inspired artist, so natural and beautiful were they in their icy sleep.

At the distance of a few hundred yards were found another frozen man and a span of frozen horses in the harness. To the quick eyes and thoughtful minds of those frontier people, accustomed to reading signs and symbols almost as readily as written words, the sad story of these unfortunate travelers was easily read as follows: They had reached a point not very far from where they were found, when the storm came upon them; that the little used road they were following was soon obliterated by the darkness and drifting snow, and becoming bewildered, they had traveled in circles as shown by the tracks of the wagon here and there over the prairie, instead of following their course; that they had neglected to wrap up the woman and children in the feather bed and bedding until they had become so chilled that it was too late to save them without artificial heat. That after securing the woman and children from the cold, as they thought, the men continued circling over the dark, storm-swept waste until hope was gone, and then decided that one of them should take the horses and seek assistance, if possible, while the other one remained with the wagon; but the one who remained was too far gone to climb into it; while the one found with the horses, from one of which he appeared to have fallen, was, no doubt, well nigh frozen when he started on his perilous mission, and being mounted on the horse so that he got the full force of the storm, was chilled to death in a few minutes.

As to the freezing of the horses: The men probably feeling the responsibility of protecting their helpless ones and anxious to

find a shelter, had driven as rapidly as possible, and the wagon being loaded, the team was jaded and hot, and when the rider fell off, stopped in their tracks and were frozen in a very short time.

The question may be asked: what should these people have done? There was one thing that could have been done to save them; and that was to have stopped on the first approach of the storm, unhitched their horses, and then huddling together in the wagon, and covering themselves with their bedding, remain there till the storm was over.